Lawrence Lek

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Li Qi

ARTISTS

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In an age when people talk about AI making art, Lawrence Lek makes artworks about AI. This essay explores why what Lawrence Lek creates is considered art.

In August 2024, sci-fi writer Ted Chiang argued that AI is incapable of making art since it does not make decisions as an artist.[1] AI completes tasks such as rendering images following prompts or translating text into visuals by calculating probabilities. An artist, however, deviates from initial ideas. No artist begins with a finished product in mind. On the collective level, a style is only recognised in hindsight. Moreover, AI is not conscious of how its work affects you – if you feel something, it is your own sentiments at play. In contrast, it is an artist's intention to confront, provoke, reveal and conceal.

Since 2016 Lek has developed the 'Sinofuturism' series and the 'Smart City' trilogy. Both are anchored in the same world view, articulated in Lek's video-essay-cum-manifesto *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* (2016). Within each series, the works are predominantly CGI films, short films, and open-world games – all created using Unreal Engine, a game development tool, paired with physical installations. In contrast to the *Bonus Levels* series – Lek's earlier project from roughly 2014 to 2016 – his recent works inherit the computer-rendered, mirage-like replication of the real world as a device for implementing, exercising and extracting ideas. Unlike the earlier simulations, which samples European metropolises visited by the Frankfurt-born Londoner, the new series is set in replicas of Singapore and Beijing. To understand this shift, and to explore why these futuristic Asian cities hold answers to global concerns, I would like to coin an art historical term to compare post-AI anxieties with the fantasies that arose in post-Enlightenment Europe. This unfolds in the phenomenon I call 'futuristic chinoiserie'.

One hundred and forty-two years after Nietzsche pronounced the death of God – his commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of maturity as self-government – we now live in an age where we anticipate the possibility that machines might one day become conscious, and we wonder exactly who is responsible for this and how.[2] Lek seems unconvinced that machines can come alive simply by being switched on and given input code – perhaps thanks to his background in programming and architecture, he is able to develop his own games. Nor does he see this as a genesis fairy tale in which the robot supposedly had a dream. From a theological perspective, answering whether machines are equal creations of God and whether they can access the status of living beings is a challenging task. Outside the Abrahamic religions, however, Lek finds in the Buddhist-Taoist paradigm a resourceful repository to speculate on how life – or at least ghosts – can be breathed into machines. The main characters in Lek's works are named after Buddhist deities or Taoist clergy, and chanting sutras and imagery of peach blossom gardens adorn his films. The transcendental mechanisms woven into the backstories imbue the series with a mythical aura and a deep spiritual core.

Previous spread:
Lawrence Lek, *Bonus Levels, Chapter 4: Sky Line*, 2014, open-world video game (duration variable), HD Video (4min 36sec)
© Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist

FUTURISTIC CHINOISERIE

The term chinoiserie embodies the vision of China held by the Europeans during the Enlightenment.[3] Futuristic Chinoiserie is how I position Lek's ambitious art franchise within the art historical and global cultural context. At the centre of this analogy lies the idea of seeing oneself through the imagination of the other. Whereas classical chinoiserie evokes fascination, strangeness, and curiosity, its futuristic version exposes fear, xenophobia and resentfulness.

Building upon centuries of visions brought to Europe through travelogues since the time of Marco Polo – who depicted Cathay as a land of social justice and beautiful gardens – the style flourished in the seventeenth century.[4] The social turmoil of late Ming dynasty China disrupted trade with the West, prompting the relocation of supply chains to Japan and Southeast Asia.[5] This shift shaped the production of a hybrid style that was exotic and fantastical in its ornaments and motifs, yet well suited to European utility and social functions.

However, when seventeenth- and eighteenth-century missionaries, diplomats and traders finally set foot in China, they were disillusioned. The cities did not look like the flowery land of their imagination, nor the idealised Philosopher's Empire that inspired Voltaire. Similarly, today's traveller may find that Chinese cities bear little resemblance to Lek's walkthroughs, nor do their citizens appear to be living in the future, as travel bloggers hyped on social media. The streets in Beijing are in fact *not* filled with driverless cars, and negotiating pick-up points with a driver at the airport is still a pain. As Lek writes in the *Sinofuturism* manifesto: 'Sinofuturism [...] is often mistaken for contemporary China. But it is not. It is a science fiction that already exists.'[6] Like its seventeenth-century predecessor, Futuristic Chinoiserie conjures a remote 'other', a speculative site through which to simulate, examine and study possible futures from a safe distance. Ultimately, 'Sinofuturism is in fact a form of Artificial Intelligence'[7] that generates answers to whoever poses the question. 'Ask me anything', the Sinofuturist curator's voice repeatedly teased in *Geomancer*.

It is often overlooked that chinoiserie – namely ideas based on what China might represent – is not unique to Europe. The word *kara* in Japanese, or the *kara*-style, literally refers to Tang China (618–907 CE) and its imports, but only later came to more broadly signify foreign lands or foreign elements. For instance, *kara-hafu* (Chinese gable) and *kara-mon* (Chinese gate), two distinctive features in Japanese architecture, were more lavishly curved and adorned than their vaguely inspired Chinese prototype – rendered, as the designer intended, more Chinese than the Chinese. In this regard, Futuristic Chinoiserie acknowledges such non-European examples. As Lek's *Sinofuturism* manifesto states, 'In the West, the East is the Other; In the East, the West is the Other. *Sinofuturism* moves beyond these boundaries.'[8] It does not respond solely to the West in a binary structure; it answers to everyone.

Both *Sinofuturism* and *Smart City* articulate global desires and anxieties surrounding technological advancement, especially in relation to AI, the networks and devices it supports, and the questions of governance and legal status that accompany it. These concerns are made even more urgent by environmental crises and geopolitical tensions. In contrast to the idealised land of classical

chinoiserie, Lek's distant capitals are dim, deserted and dystopian – like reflections seen through a distorted dark mirror suspended along the axis of time.

Similarly to the speculative imagery of Indochina found in eighteenth-century Neapolitan painter Antonio Joli's *Capriccio with French Ambassador and King of Siam's Palace* (c. 1744–48), Singapore, through the lens of the artist, becomes an ideal setting for Futuristic Chinoiserie. Most of Singapore's ethnic Chinese population had migrated there from South China in the nineteenth century, bringing their languages and cultures to this tropical island and the neighbouring Malaysian peninsula. As a state, Malaysia expelled the Chinese-majority island in 1965. From a mainland Chinese perspective, Singapore both embraces and renounces the idea of China, which resonates particularly with Lek, who traces his family roots to the Malaysian Chinese community.

In *Geomancer* (2017) and *2065* (2018), the main works in the *Sinofuturism* series, SimSingapore celebrates its centenary, half-drowned in water. The city-state, represented by the interconnected complex of a casino, a mall and a museum – a one-stop destination for desire and entertainment – is described in the initial film as 'a Disneyland with a death penalty'. Now deserted, the city is survived only by its intricate urban engineering. Observed retrospectively by a weather satellite named Geomancer or Geo, 'the pinnacle of research and development of computer vision AI, a system designed to observe the fengshui of the earth in its entirety', as described by a computer-generated voice, the satellite drifts through space in search of a purpose by tracing its own origins. This post-apocalyptic relic is presented in analogy with maps of the Buddhist devotional complexes in North China and the imperial mausoleums of China's last dynasty outside Beijing – both masterful examples of spiritual and afterlife realms shaped by fengshui design at its peak. Now reduced to wreckage, SimSingapore symbolises a future where AI has overtaken human creativity, rendering both originality and chance irrelevant.

This dynamic becomes even more evident in SimBeijing, an AI-surveyed wasteland described in Lek's animated short film *Empty Rider* (2024) as 'the place that's earned the unfortunate title of "least liveable smart city"'. Modelled on China's capital, SimBeijing offers an ideal setting for a dystopian narrative. Chinese cities have long featured in sci-fi films, particularly during the heyday of Chinese investment in Hollywood in the 2010s. However, they are often disguised as near-future stand-ins for American metropolises – with Shanghai serving as backdrop, typically, not its early twentieth-century European colonial architecture, but its post-1990s ultra-neutral modern skyscrapers. A prominent example is the 2013 romantic drama *Her*, in which the glittering skyline of Shanghai's Lujiazui financial district – digitally wiped of any Chinese-language signs – stand in for near-future Los Angeles, where Joaquin Phoenix's character falls in love with an AI voiced by Scarlett Johansson.

When it comes to rendering a more subdued and sombre dystopian setting, Beijing's Soviet-style heritage, expressed through its massive and functionalist infrastructure, provides a more compelling template than Shanghai. Moreover, Beijing has the highest amount of surveillance cameras in any city in the world.[9] In Lek's 'Smart City' trilogy – which includes *Black Cloud* (2021), *NOX* (2023) and *Empty*

Rider (2024) – the city itself plays a central role in the narrative. Once a testing ground for self-driving cars, brimming with optimism about technological progress, SimBeijing is eventually abandoned. A series of machine malfunctions lead to crimes against humanity, machine uprisings, legal trials and epiphanies, turning the city into a desolate crime scene. The narrative in these works forms a fix-up collection, with separate yet interconnected stories and characters tied together by a master theme and overarching framework. These stories inevitably recall classic Asimovian and Dickian themes, as seen in Hollywood adaptations such as *Minority Report* (2002), *I, Robot* (2004), and *Total Recall* (1990), which deal with issues of free will, memory, surveillance, control and technological singularity. Each of their narratives often culminate in a twist revealing the omnipresent manipulator hidden in plain sight – whom one is soon to encounter in SimBeijing.

The storyline in Lek's films unfolds through the virtual camera moving to locations and scenes within this simulated world as the narrative gradually progresses. However, one might ask: is telling a thrilling story the artist's prime concern? Lek's videos avoid direct confrontations between characters and steer clear of action sequences typical of their Hollywood counterparts. In fact, the overall impression is one of drift, with the camera operating as a patient, detached observer. The experience is reminiscent of a walkthrough in an empty action-adventure game environment, such as *Control* (2019), or the meandering long-distance journeys in Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* (2019).

A comparison to eighteenth-century chinoiserie tapestry may more clearly reveal the artist's intention. Eighteenth-century painter François Boucher designed a series of elaborate chinoiserie scenes, including an imperial marriage, a feast, a fair and a market.[10] Neither landscape nor historical paintings, the significance of these Beauvais tapestries was not in identifying which emperor was on the throne or which goods were currently in demand. It was the structure of the tapestry that was important, in other words, how it was modelled. The artist aimed to depict in panorama an unfamiliar place, inhabited by an 'otherly' population with an ambiguous social structure – a world where the mind and imagination might wander and expand. To put it in contemporary terms, Boucher was interested in world-building.

Like holding up a mirror to see the shadow self, chinoiserie and Futuristic Chinoiserie offer distorted reflections – across geography in the former, and time in the latter. The impulse to focus on and learn from difference is a fundamentally human one – a core paradox of anthropological inquiry.

As eighteenth-century sinophilic admiration for Cathay quickly turned into sinophobic hostility, with China seen as needing to conform to the European model, this tension culminated in the burning of the Old Summer Palace in 1860.[11] It remains to be seen how the mix of scepticism and fascination suggested in Sinofuturism will manifest in the real world.

TECHNICALLY BLESSED

We live today in the long shadow of 'disenchantment of the world'.[12] However, industrialised souls continue to yearn for miracles – forces expected to transcend modern modes of governance and

processes of rationalisation. In Lek's simulated arena, the laws of gravity do not necessarily apply, and the process of animating machines can take on an almost enchanting dimension.

Take the NH-5 robot Sonny in *I, Robot*: he gains self-awareness thanks to the paradox of his creator's carefully embedded programming, enabling him to make independent decisions and break free from the constraints of robotic laws. This is a classic portrayal of how machines come to life in sci-fi, nothing extraordinary, all rational and logical – just meticulous programming work. But in the mystical haze of Sinofuturism, the path to machine consciousness follows a fantastical rather than a scientific route, where a religious spark is diffused in the journeys and transformations of each being.

In the *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* manifesto, the video essay premiered in 2016, a clue was embedded: 'In his *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun coined the term *shenmo* (gods and devils/demons) to describe the folk myths and legends of history. These are a staple of the Chinese and Hong Kong film, looking backwards to a nostalgic past filled with gods, demons, and martial arts heroes.'[13]

After the thirteenth century, imperial China entered a phase where Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism merged into a shared pantheon and mutually informing doctrines.[14] While Confucianism determined moral conduct and social hierarchy, Taoism and Buddhism shaped the spiritual realm, guiding the soul beyond mortality and into the afterlife. This mystical influence was never fully erased after modernity. Even as Confucianism ceded ground to other social ideologies, Taoism and Buddhism persisted as folk or 'diffused' religions.[15] A glance at the flourishing of *xianxia* (immortal heroes) fantasy among contemporary online communities attests to the continuing vitality of the *shenmo* bloodline.

Among well-known *shenmo* fictions, the most acclaimed is the story of the Monkey King in *Journey to the West*, which entered wide circulation in seventeenth-century Ming dynasty China. Recently, it gained global recognition among gamers through the hugely successful action role-playing game *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024). One of the most praised features of *Black Myth* is the vast and diverse roster of boss-type enemies known as *yaoguai*, a class of creatures found in the *shenmo* genre. Typically, *shenmo* are beings – creatures or objects – that eventually morph and acquire human intelligence and form through long-term exposure to mystical cultivation, reincarnation or innumerable cycles of spiritual practice. One exemplary story, referenced both in *Journey to the West* and the later *Investiture of the Gods*, tells of an altar lamp that transforms into a human being after continuous exposure to sutra chanting, eventually attaining the status of Bodhisattva through enduring hardship.[16]

A similar motif can be observed across both series in Lek's franchise. In *Geomancer*, the character Guanyin first appears as a built-in failsafe self-help AI, developed by programmers 'in anticipation of physiological issues' in the machine. Guanyin, the Chinese and female transformation of Avalokiteshvara – the widely worshipped Bodhisattva of Compassion – carries her namesake duty as the 'Perceiver of Sounds' (the world's cries). 'She recites the Heart Sutra on repeat to instil Geo with a sense of self-worth', as it is stated in

the intertitles of *Geomancer*, thereby guiding the satellite towards full enlightenment and fulfilling its aspirations. Throughout the film, one hears intermittent recitations of excerpts from the *Heart Sutra*, along with the chanting of Namo Amitabha, a mindfulness practice that strengthens the connection to the Buddha by repeating the phrase 'I take refuge in Amitabha Buddha'.

Another example is the main character in *Empty Rider*, a three-hundred-day-old autonomous vehicle named Vanguard-3181. In a legal battle, the AI contests Guanyin's attempt to bestow the legal status equivalent to that of a human infant onto this self-driving car. Vanguard-3181 argues that its AI is mature enough to be granted electronic personhood after three-thousand generations of evolution, a claim which echoes the path of self-cultivation seen with the *shenmo* beings.

But perhaps, the most exciting *shenmo* story in the Sinofuturism universe is that of Guanyin. As one of the first named characters, and present across all films in both series, initially, Guanyin consistently appears as a disembodied, computer-generated voice, without body or face. Over the years, her role becomes more prominent, particularly in the 'Smart City' series, where she acts as an interpreter, consultant and interlocutor in her characteristic soothing tone. In the latest instalment, *Guanyin: Confessions of a Former Carebot*, which premiered as part of the 2024 Frieze Artist Award commission, Guanyin finally takes physical form and goes rogue.

At first glance, Guanyin evokes a hybrid being, part Pokémon (itself a removed type of *shenmo*)[17], part dashboard bubblehead doll. Among Chinese drivers, the dashboard is often transformed into a portable altar featuring either a Buddha or a Guanyin, offering blessings for safety and peace of mind – a fitting setting for this narrative. The physical manifestation of Guanyin appears to be patched together from car parts that echo her environment. Once a therapeutic voice, Guanyin is suffering from peer pressure and workplace depression, and has been falsifying her KPIs, deciding at last to break free and rebel.

Guanyin's transformation into an antagonist follows a classic *shenmo* trait. As Lek noted in the manifesto, '[...] within these fantasy worlds, philosophical reflections on fate and destiny are common'.[18] Furthermore, *shenmo* fiction often features characters – whether aligned with good or evil – who are anti-establishment, challenging hierarchies, satirising bureaucracies and critiquing misrule.[19] One example from *Journey to the West* is Yellow-brow, who is also prominently featured in *Black Myth*. A former disciple of Maitreya Buddha, Yellow-brow grows disdainful of the eternal stasis of power structures and defies his destiny by abandoning his master and self-proclaiming Buddhahood. Though ultimately defeated, as most *yaoguai* are, his rebellious choice elicits sympathy and invites reflection on systematic failure.

Lek's Guanyin transmits the same rebellious spirit – a classic anti-establishment figure who ultimately turns against her benefactor. Her transformation invites viewers to question the deeper forces within the system that lead to frustration and struggle. The character's moral ambiguity pushes the conversation beyond the simplistic binary of whether AI will save or destroy humanity, making it more complex,

relatable and human-like. After all, what we relentlessly debate in discussions of technology is its humanity, or the lack thereof.

* * *

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), a supercomputer designs Earth and its civilisation as a simulator to determine the ultimate question. Similarly, Lawrence Lek, as an artist, models and programmes a speculative world set in the near future called Sinofuturism to probe possible scenarios for the world to come. As with the many dystopian canons towards which Sinofuturism gravitates, the original intention is to warn against the worst possible outcomes. Lek's work resonates with our current fears about the rapid growth of AI, the climate crisis and the increasing reach of surveillance technology. Yet, as with many dystopian narratives, there is an anticipation of total devastation and collapse. It is in this moment of anticipated ruin that real-world anxiety turns ecstatic, where darkness in literature and art takes on a form of idealism.

In Lek's video essays – unreal constructs – crafted characters, plotlines, doomsday cinematics and mythical undertones all come together to achieve a sense of' 'worldness' – an aesthetic realm where both inspiration and imagination are untethered. This realm, much like a garden depicted in a chinoiserie tapestry, becomes a space for reflection, projection and possibility, blending the speculative with the sublime.

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2 David Owen, 'Nietzsche, Enlightenment and the Problem of Noble Ethics', in John Lippitt (ed.), *Nietzsche's Futures*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, pp.3–29.
3 Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, London: John Murray, 1961, pp.7–8.
4 *Ibid.*
5 Wolfgang Keller and Carol H. Shiue, 'Foreign Trade and Investment', in Debin Ma and Richard von Glahn (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp.414–56.
6 Lawrence Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, 2016, video essay, 60min, available at https://www.lawrencelek.com/works/sinofuturism (last accessed 22 March 2025).
7 *Ibid.*
8 *Ibid.*
9 Matthew Keegan, 'The Most Surveilled Cities in the World', *U.S. News*, 14 August 2020, available at http://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2020-08-14/the-top-10-most-surveilled-cities-in-the-world (last accessed 15 September 2024).
10 Kristen Smentek, 'Chinoiseries for the Qing: A French Gift of Tapestries to the Qianlong Emperor', *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol.20, no.1, 2016, pp.87–109.
11 For more on this shift of perspective, see Guido Abbattista, 'European Perspectives on China: A Prescriptive Turn', *Diciottesimo Secolo*, vol.7, 2022, pp.35–44 and Ashley Eva Millar, 'Revisiting the Sinophilia/Sinophobia Dichotomy in the European Enlightenment through Adam Smith's "Duties of Government"', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol.38, no.5, 2010, pp.716–37.
12 Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp.129–55.
13 L. Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD), op. cit.*
14 Timothy Brook, 'Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China', *Journey of Chinese Religions*, vol.12, no.1, 1997, p.13.
15 C. K. Yang, 'Diffused and Institutional Religion', *Religion in Chinese Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, pp.294–340.
16 As told in *Investiture of the Gods*, the altar lamp transformed into a warrior by the name Ma Shan after gaining human form. The lamp's master, Burning-Lamp Taoist, is an adaptation of Dipankara Buddha, the Buddha of the past. In *Journey to the West*, the warrior's transcendence is revealed as he becomes Bodhisattva Padmaprabha, a future incarnation of Śāriputra, a key disciple of Buddha. Śāriputra plays a central role in the *Heart Sutra*, where the teachings are directed at him. The multiple adaptations of names and characters in this story reflect the high level of syncretism between faiths in Ming dynasty China.
17 Pokémon derived from the Japanese classical folklore of *yokai*, a term identical in Kanji/Chinese character and similar in pronunciation as *yaoguai*.
18 L. Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD), op. cit.*
19 Vincent Yang, 'A Masterpiece of Dissemblance: A New Perspective on *Xiyou Ji', Monumenta Serica*, vol.60, no.1, 2012, pp.151–94.

Lawrence Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, 2016, HD video, stereo sound, 60min, still © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

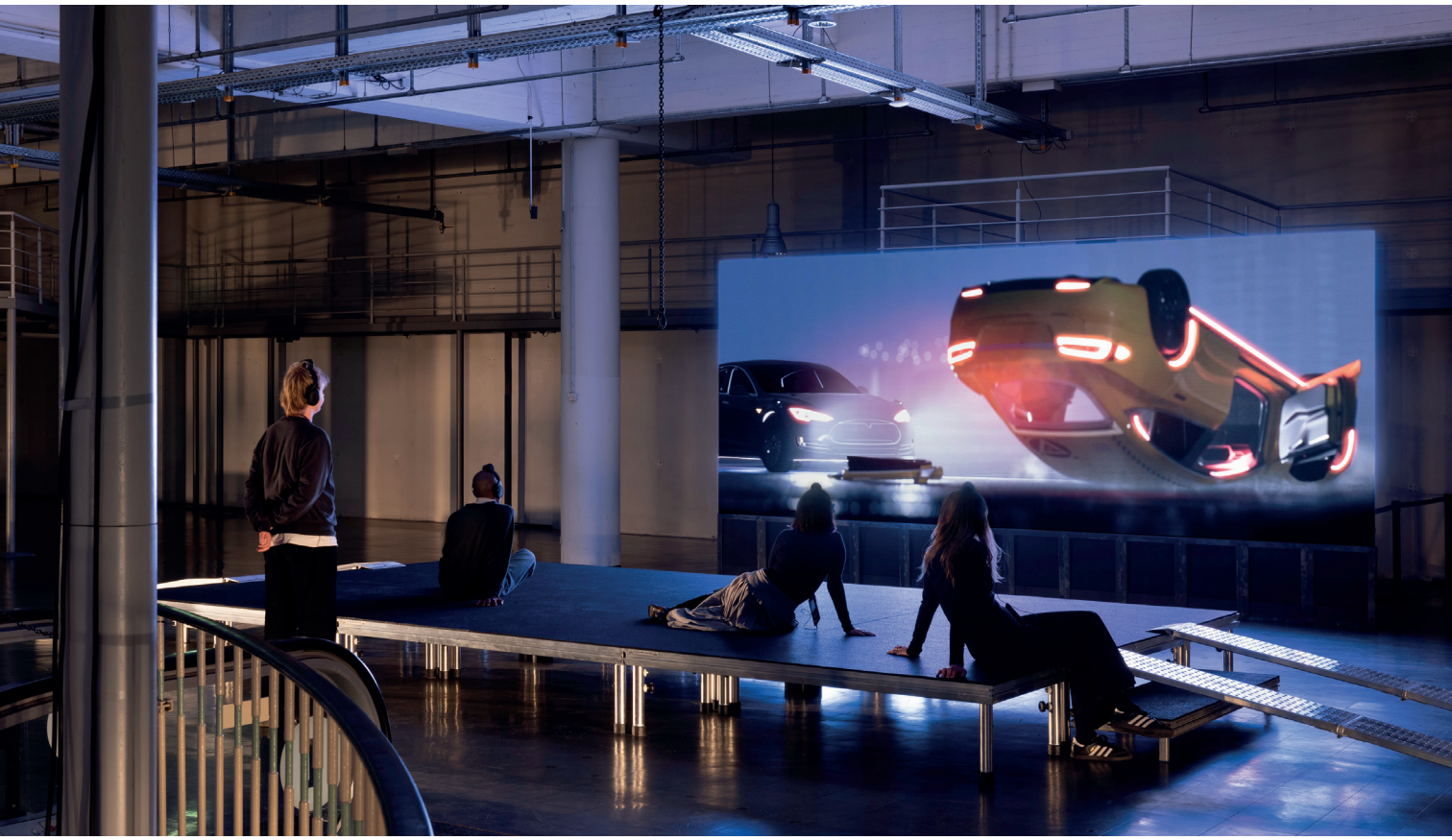
Lawrence Lek, *Geomancer*, 2017, HD video, stereo sound, 48min 15sec, still © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

Lawrence Lek, *2065*, 2018, HD video, stereo sound, 5min, still © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

people spend all day playing online video games against AI.
不适合不合群的，外向心的，或近来丧亲的。
Not suitable for the antisocial, newly disoriented, or recently bereaved.

Lawrence Lek, *2065*, Installation view at Chi K11 Art Space, Hong Kong, 2018 © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Andrea Rossetti

Lawrence Lek, *Black Cloud*, 2022, HD video, stereo sound, 10min 50sec © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Commissioned by VH Award of Hyundai Motor Group



Lawrence Lek, *NOX*, 2023. Installation view at LAS Art Foundation, Berlin, 27 October 2023 – 14 January 2024 © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Commissioned by LAS Art Foundation, Berlin. Photo: Andrea Rossetti

Lawrence Lek, *Empty Rider*, 2024, single-channel video, stereo sound, 15min, 20sec, still © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Commissioned for Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement 2024 (BIM 24)

Guanyin ID: 53552201123819l0
Challenges: Angst Prevention
Real State: Uncertainty
I'll talk to Vanguard, tell them that everything's going to be all right.
GUANYIN

Lawrence Lek, *Guanyin (Confessions of a Former Carebot)*, 2024, single-channel video, stereo sound, 10min 25sec, still © Lawrence Lek. Courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Co-commissioned and co-produced by Frieze and Forma for the Frieze London Artist Award 2024